

The Miraculous Black Virgin of Roc-Amadour.

BY B. WATERS.

A full description of a strikingly picturesque place of pilgrimage in South-West France, where the pilgrims ascend a great staircase on their knees. With a complete set of photographs.



AMONG the most ancient and remarkable of the holy places which still attract pilgrims in Republican France, the shrine and miraculous image of Our Lady on the romantic mountain of Roc-Amadour, in the Department of Lot, possesses, perhaps, the most striking ceremonies and romantic associations. According to tradition, this place of pilgrimage was founded by Zacchaeus, the publican of the Gospels, who established himself there as a hermit in the first century, and was known to his neighbours as Roc - Amadour, which means the lover of the rock. He is said to have set out from Palestine in an open boat, taking with him the miraculous image which is still to be seen there, having been guided on his journey by the wind and waves. On his arrival the rock was infested by wild beasts, but in answer to his prayers they withdrew for ever from the district. During his life-time Zacchaeus occupied a small natural cell in the rock, where he was buried in the year 70, and where his body was found in a state of perfect preservation over a thousand years later, in 1166. After this discovery so many miracles were performed by his remains, that all manner of pilgrims hastened thither from far and near. Among them was Henry II. of England, who made a vow that he would be reconciled with Becket if his pilgrimage brought him relief from an illness. He was at once cured, and Becket was restored to his See.

Roc-Amadour, inclosed among precipitous hills, is perched upon a cliff, to the side of which cling houses approached by a winding road. The pilgrimage church dates from the twelfth century, and consisted at one time of twelve sanctuaries grouped around a miraculous

chapel. Six now remain. The first of these is the Church of the Saviour, a vast basilica where pilgrims still assemble. Beneath this is the underground Church of Saint Amadour and four chapels. From the village to the sanctuaries runs a long, steep flight of 216 steps, which pilgrims are expected to ascend on their hands



From a]

ROC-AMADOUR—THE GATEWAY.

[Photo.

and knees, reciting on each step the "Hail, Mary," and the invocation, "Our Lady of Roc-Amadour, pray for us." The favourite times for pilgrimages are May, the month of Mary, and the octave of the nativity of the Blessed Virgin, from the 8th to the 15th of



THE GREAT STAIRCASE
—PILGRIMS ASCENDING
ON THEIR KNEES.

September. There is then a torchlight procession every evening, which goes far towards realizing our notions of fairyland. All along the ramparts and battlements are endless rows of Chinese lanterns of all the most exquisite hues. The cross of Jerusalem, which stands out at the extremity, is a blaze of red, and the whole mountain seems

on fire to welcome the pilgrims. These, in enormous crowds, but always in perfect order, are crawling up the steep staircase, each with a lighted candle in his hand, and, viewed from a distance, they suggest a swarm of fireflies dancing in the breeze. As the pilgrims reach the summit they make their way into the immense natural hall, where a blaze of light almost blinds them after the soft glow of the candles and lanterns in the dusk without. Some have come to implore miraculous relief for their various needs; others have brought votive offerings in return for benefits received; others, again, are dedicating small children to the service of Our Lady of Roc-Amadour. She is the "Star of the Sea," the special patron of sailors, numbers of whom have journeyed hither from long distances to ask a blessing for the coming year. In this age of coldness and scepticism it is a revelation to the traveller to find so much enthusiasm and blind faith thus gathered together in the persons of these fervent pilgrims.

Let us now take a glance round and examine the various sights of the place. Part of the way up the rock is the palace of the Bishop of Cahors, where there is an extraordinary courtyard overhung by stupendous rocks and surrounded by the buildings of the sanctuary. We pass on into the miraculous Chapel of Our Lady, on the site of the original oratory of Zacchaeus, which, having been destroyed by the fall of a rock, was replaced by the present chapel in 1479.



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THE MIRACULOUS CHAPEL, WITH VOTIVE OFFERINGS.

[Photo.]

On the wall of the chapel are the remains of a curious fresco, which some have taken to represent the Dance of Death, and others have interpreted as depicting the miraculous punishment meted out to defilers of tombs. The subject, as a matter of fact, is really the "Lay of the Three Quick and the Three Dead," in which the poet represented three careless young lords who are conversing as they ride about hunting, love, and pleasure, when they are suddenly met by three dead men, who stop them and compel them to listen to serious reflections upon the vanity of human affairs.

The chapel suffered great damage in the sixteenth century from the Huguenots, who burnt and ravaged almost everything they could lay hands upon, mutilating the images and making a bonfire of the relics. Traces of their vandalism are still conspicuous, though a great deal has been done in the way of restoration.

Pious hands, however, contrived to save the Miraculous Black Image of the Blessed Virgin, also the miraculous bell and the altar consecrated by Saint Martial. The image was rudely hewn out of the trunk of a tree, and is about 29in. in height. It represents the Virgin seated with the Child on her knee. He holds the Gospels in His hand, and each wears a crown upon the head. Formerly the whole image was covered with a thin layer of silver, but this has now been completely worn away except at the edges of the robe; and the lapse of ages in an atmosphere heavily charged with the smoke of tapers and incense has turned it completely black, for which reason

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[From a] THE MIRACULOUS BLACK VIRGIN. [Photo.]

it is known as the Miraculous Black Virgin.

The records of miracles performed by this image—or, if we prefer so to express it, of prayers which have been heard in its presence—are very numerous; and, even if we only look upon them as a form of faith-healing, it is impossible altogether to deny them. The altar, with all the votive offerings of those who have received benefits from the image, is alone a speaking testimony; and there is besides an immense array of crutches, flags, models of limbs, pictures, and other testimonies of gratitude and devotion. The more portable precious offerings were carried off by the Huguenots. The image, clad in a long, flowing robe, occupies

the principal position over the centre of the altar, and a stone is still shown which is said to be part of the original altar consecrated by Saint Martial when he was sent by Saint Peter to Gaul. The miraculous bell, suspended

in the dome, enjoys an almost equal celebrity. There is no chain or rope attached to it, for it is believed that it rings miraculously of itself whenever a miracle is being performed by the image either here or elsewhere. For instance, when a sailor, caught by a tempest, makes a despairing appeal to Our Lady of Roc-Amadour, Star of the Sea, she rings her bell in the chapel as a token that the prayers have been heard, and an echo of its peal often seems to reach him, however far away he may be. Detailed records exist of such occurrences on the 10th of February, 1385; the 20th July, 1435; 5th May, 1454; and on eleven other occasions down to 23rd September, 1554.



THE MIRACULOUS BELL (SUPPOSED TO RING EVERY TIME A MIRACLE IS PERFORMED).

The adjoining Church of the Saviour is a vast edifice of simple and severe architecture. The unusual thing about it is that it possesses two naves. An ancient wooden crucifix standing between two pillars is the only remnant of the monks' choir; and it is always the first duty of pilgrims to come and venerate it as soon as they have concluded the ascent of the long staircase on their hands and knees. Beneath this church is another, dedicated to Saint Amadour, whose relics are still preserved there. After remaining incorruptible for fifteen centuries, his body was seized by the Huguenots and placed upon a great fire of logs, in the hope that at length it might be destroyed. The flames, however, are said to have had no more effect upon it than the lapse of time, whereupon

of Christ; how he travelled by sea with his wife Saint Veronica to the coast of Médoc; how he established himself here as a hermit and preached Christianity to the wild natives, and so on.

Of the other chapels, that of Saint Michael is perhaps the most interesting. It has been left and still remains very much like a cavern with the live rock unadorned for its roof. And its door is a huge iron chest, in which the offerings of the faithful may be deposited. Above it in the wall there is set a rough imitation of Durandal, the famous sword of Roland, the companion of Charlemagne. The story goes that on his way to the wars in Spain he dedicated his sword to Our Lady of Roc-Amadour, but presently repurchased it for its weight in silver. When he was dying at Roncevalles, he raised it aloft and



From a] ROC-AMADOUR—GENERAL VIEW SHOWING ITS EXTRAORDINARY NATURAL SITUATION. [Photo.

the captain in command of the troops seized a blacksmith's hammer and proceeded to belabour it, exclaiming: "Since you will not burn, I will smash you to pieces." It was, however, the hammer which was smashed, and even the Huguenots were abashed when they saw a stream of crimson blood trickle from the body. After their departure, the remains were reverently put into a reliquary, which now stands upon the altar. Behind this altar is a sacristy, which was formerly a cistern, where the rains, percolating through the rock, were collected. The church also contains eight interesting pictures, representing scenes in the life of Zacchaeus—how he climbed a sycamore tree to behold the passage

smote the Pyrenees, which instantly opened at the blow. Then, before he drew his last breath, he cast the sword into the air and it instantly travelled to Roc-Amadour, where it remained until 1183, when Henry of the Short Mantle pillaged the place and carried it off. The present copy was set up in order to afford a permanent record.

From these sanctuaries a secret stairway inside the rock leads up to the castle, which enjoyed a great reputation as a fortress in the Middle Ages. There are 236 stairs, which must have required tremendous labour to construct in the live rock with no other implements than the pick and the hammer.

At present the castle serves as a dwelling-place for the priests attached to the service of the sanctuary. If for no other reason, it is worth climbing up to the summit in order to enjoy the magnificent panorama which stretches away over fantastic rocks, and the smiling valley of the Alzou, with its dark girdle of walnut-trees.

One of the most interesting sights of the place is the Way of the Cross, the various stations of which are at once quaint and artistic. Adjoining the sixth station is a very remarkable Grotto of the Agony, where, beneath the rock which has been blackened by the lapse of centuries,

grotto the pilgrims reach a colossal cross, where their labours are terminated, and they pause to kneel and offer up fresh prayers and vows.

Nowadays there is no particular difficulty about making the pilgrimage to Roc-Amadour. The railway takes you within two miles of it, and a service of still more prosaic omnibuses brings you to the foot of the hill. But in the Middle Ages its remoteness and the rugged nature of the neighbouring country led to its being selected as an objective in the highest degree praiseworthy for penitents to visit. Many people were even sent there as a political punishment. In his treaty of peace with the Flemish



From a]

THE GROTTO OF THE AGONY.

[Photo.

the Saviour is represented on his knees, receiving the cup from the hands of an angel, while the group of sleeping Apostles is stretched upon a heap of stones hard by. The fourteenth station is also located in a grotto, and represents with wonderful art the laying of Christ in His tomb. To understand real religious fervour, this station should be visited on the occasion of one of the great torchlight processions, when some three thousand pilgrims, each holding a lighted taper, throng the entrance to the grotto, and the roar of their hymns to Mary re-echoes far away among the hills. Finally, above this

in 1304, Philip le Bel reserved the right to punish two thousand of the most guilty persons of the town and territory of Bruges by sending them on a pilgrimage to Roc-Amadour, and similar clauses were inserted in treaties in 1316 and 1326, so terribly difficult was it to reach this place. The roads in the neighbourhood were then so dangerous that numerous military posts were established along them for the protection of pilgrims, as well as inns for their entertainment, and watchfires at night-time upon the adjoining hills, as is the case on the way to Mecca.